

Sermon for the 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time
 First Presbyterian Church, Bemidji
 Matthew 7:21-29\

THE VIEW THROUGH LOVE-COLORED GLASSES

A promotional message currently running on the Public Television, you may have seen it, begins with an old black-and-white newsreel clip of a tri-motor airplane on skis, taking off from the arctic tundra in what looks like a blizzard. The voice-over is a man speaking with a soft voice and thoughtful, philosophical kind of expression. The speaker reflects on the idea that human beings are seekers, perpetual explorers. With that kind of philosophical prelude, it turns out that what we are seeking is oil, and that the oil industry is exploring in more intelligent and more environmentally sensitive ways. Presumably, therefore, the oil industry is more worthy of public trust and that is the point of the message.

The premise, though, is right: human beings are always looking for something and what we are looking for provides a clue to our values and our character. Jesus had some important things to say about what we should be seeking and how we ought to conduct the search. It all boils down to a question of our priorities: what are those valuable things in our lives that we think are most important and in what order do we place them when we make our practical decisions. That's what the Sermon on the Mount is about. It is really a summary of all Jesus had to teach about how we ought to live our lives in view of our citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

We are seekers, and what we are seeking, to put it in our theological shorthand is "salvation," although we have widely differing ideas of what that is. In the Gospels it is often physical healing that people want from Jesus, the blind want to see, the leper wants to return to his family, the lame want to walk, The hungry want food. For them, that is "salvation," and Jesus did not turn them away. How very often it was that Jesus' saving action began at the physical, practical level. But after the act of freeing people from whatever condition that confined them, Jesus turned the action to the deeper level of spiritual health. And when you look at the root meaning of salvation, the word means "healing."

In the Old Testament, the word that most often comes to us as "salvation" in its original sense means to open up, to widen, to make more expansive, to liberate. That is also what Jesus was doing. He was setting people free from the consequences of their sin and the absorption with themselves; opening up to them the immense possibilities of a life led fully in the light of God's eternal Being. Call it salvation. Call it the Kingdom of Heaven; or simply call it God -- in whom we live and move and have our full being.

In his great sermon Jesus had some warnings for those who faithfully and earnestly looked for the coming of God's rule. That is the bottom line of today's lesson: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one whose does the will of my father. who is in heaven.'" Makes sense, doesn't it? There is no kingdom of heaven unless there are citizens who will obey the ruler! And he doesn't mean that we shouldn't say "Lord, Lord ..." That is worship. That is prayer. But pious words, faithful worship, aren't enough. What is required -- of you and of me -- is some serious obedience!

You say, "But I'm already there! I obey the commandments. I am a good and decent, honest person. I fold the church bulletin for the Sunday service! Jesus says, "No. No. That's not what I mean. It isn't your behavior that counts. It's the quality of your relationships that makes the difference. You shall LOVE the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. And when those relationships of love are there, justice, mercy, peace, healing -- all the things we yearn for -- fall into place of themselves. They are the products, not the starting-point.

I like to think of it as looking at life, at the world, at people, at God, through different kinds of glasses. There are the glasses of the self. I look at my own needs, I look at my own hopes, my own vision of heaven, my own concern about how to get there. That's where most of us begin and where a lot of us stay. But Jesus offers us, and God requires of us, a different way of looking at life, at the world, at the others around us. Call that the love-tinted spectacles. Our own interests, our own concerns, our vision of our own salvation, even, are submerged under our love-colored concern for the Other.

I heard about a conversation between a wise mother and her adult daughter. The mother was dying and the end was not far off. All of those issues that come up between mothers and daughters -- and I suppose also between fathers and sons -- had fallen away in a moment of peaceful intimacy. The daughter said, 'Mother, when you get to heaven, everyone will love you.' And that wise mother said, "No, when I get to heaven, I will love everyone."

The stunning surprise is that when, absorbed in the love of God and love for the other, we have abandoned the notion of our own salvation, it is exactly at that moment that we have found it. And that view, through our love-colored glasses, is glorious beyond all imagining.

